

OBITUARY

LES YOUNG

With Les Young's passing, British entomology has lost one of its most skilful and dedicated practitioners. Those who knew him well have lost a valued friend. Little known aspects of Les's honourable service record are given in the appreciations below. It says much of his nature that although I knew him well for fourteen years, he alluded to this part of his life perhaps twice. He would rather talk of butterflies and particularly aberrations of the Lycaenidae.

He was a very successful field-worker and built up a marvellous collection of aberrations. But his main love was the breeding of butterfly aberrations and this he advanced to a level almost of artistry that may be unrivalled in the history of amateur entomology. His first great successes were with the small copper. It is a species that had a notorious reputation for being difficult to pair and even harder to overwinter. It defeated even the great L. W. N. Newman. Les, however, achieved almost total success, rearing brood after huge brood and revealing the genetics behind a number of its forms. I am glad to say I am far from alone in confirming that failure remains a more frequent outcome for most of us with this species.

In later years he turned his attention to the common blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) and, beginning in 1984 with two very insignificant aberrations, eventually produced a pure strain of the striking ab. *radiata*. In doing so he showed that this very rare and most characteristic of lycaenid aberrations was, in some cases, at least, under genetic rather than environmental control. With his attitude in life that a thing worth doing is worth doing properly, he devoted himself to the task and his house and garden became a butterfly-producing conveyer-belt. He would rear four broods a year with up to one thousand butterflies per brood. A highly practical man, his solutions to the many problems he encountered, whether it be inbreeding weakness, predators,



Les Young in Hartley Wood, Hampshire, June 1981.

climate or the problems of poisonous foodplants (characteristic of birdsfoot trefoil, the main food of the caterpillar), were often ingenious and always successful. In fact I believe he derived as much pleasure from developing a successful technique as he did in the results it produced.

An outward manner that might appear abrupt belied the man. Certainly he did not suffer fools, but to those who became his friends he was generous to a fault with his time, knowledge and, indeed, the concrete results of his hard work—his butterflies. On occasion he would open a cabinet drawer of selected, and perfectly set, specimens and invite a friend to take home the one that most took his fancy. He was, to borrow the description he bestowed upon others for whom he had respect, very much a “good sort”.

His standing among entomologists was indicated by the fact that he was often the first to receive a call when a special butterfly had been captured or bred. If the news elicited an indifferent ‘humph’ one knew the time invested in this insect had not been wasted. A change in tone to a ‘Humph’ betraying interest, suggested you were onto something really good. He leaves a gap that will not easily be filled—a gap of real ability and of personality.

R. D. G. BARRINGTON

Les was well known in the British Entomological and Natural History Society, especially for his breeding experiments on British Lycaenidae, but few of us were aware of his other life interest, in flying.

Joining the infantry early in World War II, Les answered a call for volunteers for pilot training. After rigorous training he qualified as a pilot and navigator and became a member of the Glider Pilot Regiment. He piloted a towed heavy glider to Normandy on D-Day, and later took part in the ill-fated Arnhem landings. On demobilization from the Army he entered civil aviation and acted as pilot/navigator in the early days of renewal of civil airline activities in India and elsewhere. As the Cold War led to attempts by the Russians to close access to West Berlin, Les took part in the Berlin Airlift, itself a hazardous operation. On his retirement from civil flying in about 1963, Les had accumulated over 5000 hours in his service and civilian log books.

Most of us knew Les’s dry humour—“I was the most frightened man of all in the D-Day operation”. When I heard him reply to an enquiry from a stranger about his service career that he “was Air Vice-Marshal Bennett’s navigator” I thought it was typical Young humour, but later found, on studying Les’s flying log books that he had in fact acted as second pilot/navigator to D. C. T. Bennett (*the* most famous navigator of WWII) on the Berlin airlift, when Don Bennett had his own airline. Although Les was one of the many who received no special decoration, he had a distinguished service career, and his flying log books reflect the same dedication and attention to detail that were apparent in his entomological pursuits.

Les rather purported to dislike his fellow men, but this was a pose. Nobody could have been more helpful than Les to entomologists or others who needed advice or moral support.

T. S. ROBERTSON

In the summer of 1945, final preparations were being made by a joint task force of army and RAF units in Central India to invade Singapore and to drive out the occupying Japanese forces. Les Young was a member of that task force. During the first week of September, Les visited an army friend in the field hospital. I occupied the next bed being unable to walk due to a severe case of foot rot. At that time, there

was a healthy rivalry between the Army and the RAF which precluded much social contact. Les was an Army glider pilot and I was an RAF pilot. However, being a friendly man, Les had a chat with me. He said that it was rotten luck being stuck "in dock" when everyone else was celebrating the end of the Japanese war. However, we both agreed that we had been lucky because the atom bombs had probably saved our lives. Les asked me what I was going to do when I got home. I said my hobby was collecting butterflies. He said that was his hobby too. We talked of bugs and localities. He visited me again for another chat and, although he spoke little about his life in the army, I gathered that he had been associated with the Arnhem landings. Two days later, I was posted to Madras and I didn't see Les again for a long time. Being an "early release" man, Les was entitled to fly home to "Blighty"; later releases had to travel home by ship.

Seven years later, I was collecting butterflies near Bookham Common with my young family when a man came over to talk to us: it was Les! We became good friends and I introduced him to the South London Entomological and Natural History Society (now the British) and he became a member. He was still flying for a living. He worked for many different commercial airlines as air crew doing whatever job that they required. He was particularly proud of his navigational skills which got his aircraft to the destination by quicker and shorter routes than had been anticipated. At that time, the sophisticated computer/radar systems were not always available.

Les lived just outside the perimeter of Heathrow where he owned a house which he called "Dim View". Here he started breeding butterflies. Les and I had several trips out to obtain stock and he was expert at finding the eggs of the butterflies. He taught me how to find the eggs of various hairstreaks. We had one notable trip to Norfolk in search of *P. machaon*, long before present restrictions were implemented. After two days of searching, we found a new breeding location in a fen several miles from the *P. machaon* reserve. My wife was off the path in this fen when a local man called out in alarm. He then explained to us that the place was known locally as a mud hole and that cattle and people had been sucked down, disappearing without trace. Once more we had been lucky. Fine colonies of this superb insect, including a few vars, were bred giving countless pleasure to many people. It was not easy keeping the caterpillars alive because of the difficulty in obtaining suitable food plant near London and in the event they had to be fed on fennel which was found growing wild near Sandwich in Kent. After several years, Les returned the butterflies to the fen where we had found them.

With the increase in air-traffic, the perimeter boundary at Heathrow was extended to allow for a lengthening of the runways. Les was forced to sell "Dim View" and he had a hard time ensuring that he was paid a fair price for the property. Whether this was the cause or not, he started to suffer from angina and this limited his activities. However, by now, his experience in breeding was, beyond doubt, exceptional. He produced superb bred vars of *L. phlaeas*. Some of these are illustrated in T. G. Howarth's *South's British Butterflies*. Later he specialized in the selective breeding of *P. icarus* variations with great success. He exhibited many of these at numerous annual exhibitions of the Society and they are illustrated in the proceedings and journal.

Les remained a bachelor—he was very much a man who called a spade, "a spade". He moved to Hampshire where he spent his retirement breeding British butterflies. Les's vocabulary might have been termed colourful but he was a kind man who could be affectionately termed as a "rough diamond" and he will be missed.

DON WALKER